DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 152 684 SP 012 152

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TITLE When Teacher Educator Practices What Is Preached: Peer Teaching and Evaluation in a Field-Based English Methods Course.
PUB DATE [77]
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS English Instruction; Field Instruction; *Methods Courses; *Peer Evaluation; Peer Groups; Peer Teaching; *Preservice Education; *Small Group Instruction; Student Teaching; Teacher Evaluation; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

A teacher educator with an over-sized class describes an experiment with peer teaching. The class of fifteen students was divided into groups of three, defined as "mutual support groups," with each member contributing to and responsible for the performance of others. The first task assigned these "trios" was to identify desirable competencies, compare them with the other small groups in the class, and finally arrive at mutually agreed upon goals upon which evaluation of performance could be based. In the field these students were assigned to different schools so the group could receive maximum exposure to different teachers, students, and perspectives on curriculum. Shortly before an active week of student teaching, the trios met to discuss plans for their mini-units, to schedule days for cross-visitation, and to share concerns about likely problems with students or cooperating teachers. Observation and evaluation of members of the group took place during student teaching. The author concludes that this method of instruction, properly organized and supervised, has considerable merit. (JD)

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When Teacher Educator Practices What Is Preached:

Peer Teaching and Evaluation in a Field-Based English Methods Course

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SP012 152

Peer teaching and evaluation—these are strategies we in English education talk a good deal about in our methods courses, especially in the area of teaching composition. "A teacher can't and shouldn't read everything the kids write," we note, "unless they write only a little. Let the kids work together in responding to and evaluating each other's writing. Let them collaborate in revising their work. When they know that other students will read what they write, they'll instinctively assign more importance to the task. Kid audiences are real audiences, not like teachers," we go on, "and remember: the process of responding and evaluating probably has as much positive impact on the evaluator as it does on the writer."

Such sermonettes, padded by reference to research and made more eloquent by quoting authorities, are a staple commodity in most methods courses concerned with teaching English. Too often, though, we in teacher education fail to see the possibilities of practicing what we preach. Recent experience has taught me, however, that peer teaching and evaluation among methods students is both workable and effective, helping students develop key teaching competencies, broadening the base of evaluative data they receive, and developing a sense of cooperation and concern among young teachers that has carried through student teaching and beyond.

In September, 1976, fifteen students, a bumper crop for our small undergraduate program in English education at Columbus College, enrolled in my methods course. Each student was to spend thirty hours of contact time with me, on campus, thirty hours with a curriculum specialist, and between seventy and eighty hours in a local school, working under an

English teacher I would be able to select. Off-campus experience would begin after the third week, gradually increasing from six hours a week to fifteen near the end of the quarter. "Teachweek," during which each student would teach two secondary English classes for five days, loomed in the distance. In the meantime, my role would be to help students clarify philosophical assumptions about teaching, learn how to plan, gain a perspective on English and language arts curriculum, and develop a five-day mini-unit for "Teachweek." Additionally, I would probably need to lend a shoulder on which to cry out insecurities about whether high school kids could be kept from throwing erasers, desks, and each other around while a novice was, nominally, the teacher.

I was used to working with no more than five or six methods students at a time. Fifteen of them, though, presented problems. Hour long planning conferences? Unlikely. Two one-hour observations with each student during "Teachweek"? Mathematically and geographically impossible, since most would be teaching in the morning, and at seven different schools. Detailed post-observation sessions? Perhaps, but not in the careful, step-by-step, and time-consuming way I had used in the past.

All of a sudden, though, I saw myself on the edge of the trap into which fall so many high school English teachers who, faced with too large classes and spouses dedicated to doing something with evenings and weekends other than watch papers being graded, begin assigning bi-weekly writing to her students in order to cut the volume of paperwork. No, these young men and women deserved better than that. I realized, finally, that what they was each other, and that they, in their way, would be as good as I am at

pre-teaching planning sessions, observation, identification of competencies indicated or not, and post-observation analysis of lessons. My own role could be what it had been, in an abbreviated sense, and I could devote additional effort to helping them do for each other what I had previously done alone.

By the second meeting, students were assigned to trios, which I defined as "mutual support groups" with each member contributing to and responsible for the performance of others. "Teachweek" would expand to "Teachtime" eight days instead of five, with two days reserved for visiting other trio members in the midst of teaching, and the eighth day included for insurance sake.

My first goal for trio members was that they get to know each other well and become accustomed to working together. The general informality of the class, the use of ice-breakers--both to break our own ice and to consider their utility in the English classroom--and several small-group activities helped build a sense of familiarity and purpose, both for trios and for the whole group. Clearly, we were okay people involved in something important, pleasurable, and achievable.

It was also necessary to introduce students to the notion of competencies, since the observation-evaluation instrument they would use later off-campus is competency-based. For our third meeting, therefore, I asked students to consult sources other than their texts to gather statements on what English teachers ought to be able to do when they teach. On the day the assignment was due, trios worked for thirty minutes compiling a list of competencies, stated in order of importance, which each trio member could support. The five lists were then compared. To con-

clude the hour, I distributed copies of the observation-evaluation form, asking that students look over the listed competencies before our next meeting. The following day, a general discussion of the competency-based approach was conducted. These questions were among those we considered:

> What should an observer look for if he wishes to gather evidence of a specific competency?
>
> Should there be minimum performance levels for a competency? If so, what is a reasonable level for students in the field prior to student teaching?
>
> How do teachers acquire competencies in the first place?
>
> What should the methods instructor's role be? The methods student's role?
>
> What about competencies that involve attitudes and philosophy? Can they be measured? Should they?
>
> What are the advantages and disadvantages of the competency-based approach to training and certification? Is a teacher with all these competencies by definition a "good teacher"? How could such a claim be validated or disproved?

I, like many others, have reservations about a no-holds-barred competency-based program, which I promptly admitted to these students. However, I do accept the importance of careful dilineation of my own objectives and careful measurement of what a methods student or student teacher actually does in the classroom. For these fifteen students, what I wanted most is what might be called "competency-consciousness," the gist of which is that specific elements of good teaching do exist, that they can and have been defined at least in part, and that the novice teacher's

task is to deliberately work on developing or refining his skills. I, too, would have to be "competency-conscious," trying to practice what the competencies preached in my own teaching and providing instruction designed to nurture competency growth. But the ultimate burden, I explained, would be theirs--inevitably and cooperatively theirs.

By the time students were sent into the field, trios were functioning more or less as intended, and individual students were aware of the competencies the course was designed to generate. Cooperating teachers and principals, in turn, had been informed of the new trio program, had received copies of the evaluation form, and knew that, in addition to the methods student assigned to their schools, two "outsiders" would be visiting late in the quarter. By design, trio members had been assigned to different schools, and one member of each group had been placed at the junior-high level, thereby complementing the depth gained in one classroom with exposure to different teachers, students, and perspectives on curriculum.

The early weeks of off-campus activity, perhaps the first twenty of the total eighty hours, centered on an orientation to the students, teachers, and instructional programs at the host schools, with the methods student playing a comparatively passive role, at least in contrast to what was coming. Students met in two-hour sessions once weekly with me, one of my functions being that of putting in some perspective what went on in the real world. By mid-quarter, students were, in general, on top of the situation in the field, had learned the names of students and had worked with them enough to know they didn't bite, and were full of encouraging and dismal anecdotes about what teaching was really like. Most were beginning to look toward Teachtime, still three to four weeks

away, and had discussed with cooperating teachers what they might be teaching then. Whenever possible, it should be explained here, I select cooperating teachers who can prop up an insecure methods student, will get reasonably out of the way of a student who is full of ideas, and who--for Teachtime--provide freedom within limits, giving the methods student a guide to what might be taught, but allowing real breathing room in selection of both content and teaching strategy.

On the mid-quarter examination, I wanted to measure how well my "competency-consciousness" scheme was working, so I included the following essay question.

> Please refer back to the Secondary Block Evaluation form distributed early in the quarter. Then discuss three to five competencies listed on the form you believe your cooperating teacher exhibits to a high degree. Explain, referring to events that have happened in your cooperating teacher's classroom.

Judging from the results, this question served to teach as well as test, heightening student awareness that competencies are not abstractions and that the alert observer can muster specific data suggesting their presence in teacher behaviors. This would be of benefit during Teachtime, when they would be engaged in formal peer observation.

The real work of the trios was now ready to begin. First, two weeks before Teachtime, trios met for an hour to discuss tentative plans for their mini-units, to schedule days for cross-visitation, to share concerns about likely problems they were to have with students, with cooperating teachers, or even with me. Their prescribed task was to examine teaching

plans, playing devil's advocate, looking for trouble spots where student attention migh lag, where teacher talk might dominate unproductively, where directions or questions might be vague. One week later, I would meet with trios in order to review my perceptions about each student's "Final Tentative Plan," revised on the basis of ideas gained from trio members and the cooperating teacher. As necessary, I would spend fifteen to twenty minutes with each student, or about an hour with the trio, all three members sharing in the analysis of each emerging mini-unit.

A second task of the trios grew out of my realization that the evaluation form was probably too long to be workable, too long for both methods student and overburdened cooperating teacher. When I posed this idea, the class quickly agreed. I decided, therefore, to ask each student to identify ten pivotal competencies, achievement of which, for him, was both necessary and probable during Teachtime. A list of pivotal competencies was submitted, to which I added a second ten from those remaining on the evaluation instrument. These I individualized, trying to select competencies which related to the strengths and weaknesses of the student as I perceived them. During a final pre-Teachtime meeting, trios shared lists of twenty pivotal competencies, noting what behaviors each hoped to exhibit as indicators of the competency in question.

This process of selecting what my students called "Big Deal Competencies," while arrived at out of necessity, was, in retrospect, one of the best things the trios did. Rather than trying to be all things in ten hours of teaching, students were able to concentrate on what was both personally significant and achievable. My role in identifying ten additional competencies served to balance each student's list. Through observation

of other students, finally, each student's awareness of competencies chosen by others would be maintained.

Teachtime was eight days of frenzied but productive activity. My role became in part that of referee, making sure that principals knew who was going to be where when, scheduling my own observations in a way that did not conflict with trio visits, and conferencing with cooperating teachers about last-minute details. Additionally, I fulfilled my usual function of advising students on the basis of problems they brought to my attention or ones I observed in their teaching.

By the end of the eight days, my class had taken on the mannerisms of a troup of veterans, tired, reasonably successful, having experienced the sounds and smells of battle. One final job remained for trios. Through each peer observation, students worked with the block evaluation form, on which had been circled the twenty pivotal competencies chosen earlier. When we met on the first day following Teachtime, each student received the written evaluations of two other students. Trios then met for an hour to share their evaluations, having been advised that what was said on the forms was for trio members only, and would not be shared with me. This helped students be honest with each other without worrying about grades or how I would perceive negative criticisms of their teaching. The final trio meeting was followed by private sessions with me, in which evaluative statements made by me, the cooperating teacher, and the student himself were reviewed.

Peer evaluation through trio groups was, of course, only one aspect of the English methods course this past fall. What, though, were the results of this effort? Was it worth it?

In order to find out, I asked students to briefly evaluate the trio approach. The results of this informal assessment indicate that student responded favorably to working in trios and gained important insights into themselves, teaching, and other trio members. Of fourteen students completing the anonymous evaluation, twelve indicated that the trio program was either "helpful" or "very helpful"; two, on the other hand, checked "not sure." Ten indicated that they wanted some form of the trio program to extend into student teaching.

Class members indicated that insights gained from the trio arrangement were of three basic kinds: self knowledge, knowledge about others, and knowledge about schools and/or teaching. To be sure, what was learned did not differ much from lessons I had been trying to get across on my own, but--because the source of these ideas was other students--they may have a better chance of sticking and not be lost in the first year of teaching, as so often happens to teaching ideals. Hopefully, one or two key bits of implicit or subconscious learning took place--first, that teaching doesn't have to be the lonesome task it sometimes is; and, second, that good teaching involves cooperation and honest criticism by both self and others.

When asked to identify problems with the trio system, students made numerous suggestions, most of which dealt with the difficulty of scheduling trio meetings, the need to more carefully define individual responsibilities toward the trio, and an occasional complaint about the failings of specific trio members. One or two would have preferred choosing their own trios, an arrangement I had rejected in order to make each group as heterogenous as possible. Undoubtedly, something was lost as well as gained in assigning group members myself.

With some revision, the trio system has extended into student teaching. This past winter, I supervised six English student teachers, each of whom was released for two "professional days" to observe and critique two others. Weekly seminars on campus found trios working together on a variety of activities and projects designed to help student teachers deal with problems I had observed. How well the trios functioned during student teaching is a moot point. There is some indication that winter quarter student teachers were to preoccupied with their own problems to become more than politely interested in what others were doing, but this seeming disinterest may have resulted from days lost due to the energy crisis or simply the personalities of this group of student teachers. Another quarter will yield a better idea of what's what with trios during student teaching.

Peer teaching and evaluation in methods courses? Yes. You and other teacher educations should consider this strategy. You may find that all you've said to your students about these approaches holds true for them as well as it does for children and adolescents.